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Narrating Estrangement: Exile, Memory, and the Politics of Home in *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* (2016)

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Abstract: Hisham Matar's *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* portrays exile not merely as physical displacement, but as a continuing condition that reshapes identity, memory, and belonging. Combining personal testimony with Libya's political history, the memoir follows Matar's return to his homeland after decades of exile in search of answers about the disappearance of his father under Muammar Gaddafi's regime. However, the narrative reveals that return cannot fully restore a lost sense of home; instead, it exposes the instability and emotional complexity of belonging itself. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theorisation of estrangement, this study explores how *The Return* represents exile through fragmented narration, sensory memory, and shifting temporalities. The memoir's non-linear structure mirrors the fractured consciousness produced by political violence and displacement, while the unresolved absence of the father becomes the central force shaping the narrator's sense of self. Through memories, rumours, and family stories, home is reconstructed as an affective and unstable space marked by longing, uncertainty, and loss. By examining the relationship between memory, estrangement, and political exile, this study demonstrates how Matar transforms memoir into both personal testimony and political reflection. Therefore, *The Return* challenges fixed distinctions between home and away, suggesting that belonging remains an ongoing and unresolved process shaped by displacement, remembrance, and emotional negotiation.

Keywords: *Exile, Estrangement, Home, Memory, Belonging, Hisham Matar, Diaspora, Memoir, Fragmentation*

Introduction

“I would never be part of anything. I would never really belong anywhere... I am a stranger, and I always will be.” Through this profound reflection on alienation, Jean Rhys articulates an emotion that resonates with the themes of exile and displacement. The experience of perpetual outsider status, particularly when revisiting one’s homeland, encapsulates the emotional reality faced by numerous individuals shaped by political upheaval and migration. Such questions of belonging, identity, and home are central to *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* (2016), a memoir by Hisham Matar. In this work, Matar details his return to Libya after years of exile, as he searches for answers regarding the fate of his father, Jaballa Matar, a political dissident who was imprisoned and subsequently disappeared under Muammar Gaddafi’s regime (Hanafy 184).

The memoir interlaces personal memories with Libya’s tumultuous political history, illuminating the profound impact that political oppression can have on both individual identity and collective experience. In this respect, *The Return* highlights “the harrowing consequences of alienation arising from political and racial otherness in contemporary Libya” (Nyongesa, Gaita, and Justus 1), where institutional marginalisation produces psychological fragmentation and sense of exile. The absence of Matar’s father becomes the narrative’s focal point, prompting his return to Libya years later in an attempt to reconstruct the past and confront the psychological ramifications of exile.

Also, it simultaneously interrogates the concept of return. As Noha Hanaf asserts, although the narrative centres on Matar’s return to Libya, it ultimately “problematizes the concept of home” (Hanaf 184), suggesting that a sense of belonging cannot be restored simply by returning to one’s country of origin. Instead, Matar’s memoir presents home as an unstable and elusive construct, shaped by memory, displacement, and political circumstance. The text, thus, raises far-reaching questions concerning identity formation, spatial belonging, and the feasibility of reclaiming one’s home.

Sara Ahmed’s theorisation of estrangement offers a critical framework for comprehending the fragmented subjectivity characteristic of exile. In “*Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement*” (1999), Ahmed defines estrangement as a process that “names the movement from one register to another, rather than referring to different states of being” (Ahmed 344). Therefore, estrangement is not limited to physical displacement, but encompasses emotional and relational disconnections that unsettle the familiar. For the exiled subjects, movement between homes outlines the contours of a “space of belonging” (Ahmed 330) that is always provisional: a condition in which departure and arrival are not discrete moments, but ongoing processes marked by negotiation and uncertainty.

For Ahmed, the concept of home transcends mere geography or familial ties; rather, it is understood as a lived and embodied experience. Ahmed notes that locality “intrudes into the senses: it defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers. The lived experience of being-at-home hence involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other*” (Ahmed 341; original emphasis). Migration, therefore, leads to a division of home: “[t]he journeys of migration involve a splitting of home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience” (Ahmed 341). Estrangement, in this context, is presented as an ongoing process—a continual negotiation of home through mobility, displacement, and the act of revisiting places left behind.

Furthermore, migration occurs both temporally and intergenerationally. Ahmed emphasises that exile encompasses more than the immediate sensation of relocation, extending to “generational acts of storytelling about prior histories of movement and dislocation” (Ahmed 342). Such narratives transmit memories of migration across time, shaping individuals’ understanding of identity and belonging. Thus, migration and exile emerge as ongoing processes in which the past continually informs the present. Ahmed elaborates on this point by noting that the term “estrangement” shares etymological roots with “strange,” yet signifies a more complex phenomenon: “a process of transition, a movement from one register to another” (Ahmed 343). In this sense, estrangement denotes a dynamic state of negotiation between familiarity and unfamiliarity, rather than a static condition of alienation. From this perspective, estrangement involves the active negotiation of both continuity and loss in relation to home. Within this theoretical framework, narratives of exile serve as essential grounds for articulating and negotiating the tensions between memory, belonging, and displacement.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed’ concept of estrangement and her theorisation of the unstable nature of “home,” I argue that Hisham Matar’s *The Return* employs narrative fragmentation to portray the dislocated subjectivity intrinsic to exile. The memoir’s shifting form mirrors the narrator’s fragmented sense of belonging, demonstrating how political exile erodes the possibility of a secure home and transforms personal recollection into a form of political critique on displacement and loss. Accordingly, Matar’s memoir conveys personal grief while simultaneously revealing the intricate political and emotional dimensions of exile, thereby suggesting that home is not merely recovered but is continually renegotiated through memory, affect, and lived experience. To elucidate how these dynamics function within the text, this paper adopts a close reading methodology, analysing the memoir’s language, narrative structure, and representations of memory and place to reveal how Matar articulates the conditions of exile and estrangement.

Fragmented Memory and the Form of Exile

The fragmented form of *The Return* reflects the psychological disorientation produced by exile and trauma. Matar disregards a strictly orderly sequence of events, instead shifting between memories, political comments, dreams, familial anecdotes, and depictions of contemporary experiences in Libya. This disrupted narrative structure exposes the instability of memory itself. As Asati and Tiwari note, writers frequently utilise “fragmented storytelling, reflecting trauma’s impact on memory and perception” (39), suggesting that Matar’s formal shifts mirror a consciousness struggling to reconcile a fractured personal and political history.

The narrator’s recollections emerge in fragments, implying that exile disrupts not just one’s relationship to a place but also one’s ability to form a coherent sense of self. This structural choice aligns closely with core tenets of literary trauma theory, as Asati and Tiwari argue:

Trauma’s impact on temporal perception and memory often results in non-chronological narratives, reflecting the fragmented recall experienced by survivors...Traumatic recollections frequently resurface in characters or storylines, illustrating the persistent nature of trauma. The experience of trauma can lead to a fragmentation of the self or altered perceptions, which is manifested in narrators whose accounts may be unreliable (39).

The memoir’s fragmented form directly illuminates Matar’s narrative method. The memoir’s shifting chronology reproduces the instability and discontinuity associated with exile, demonstrating how trauma disrupts both memory and self-perception. Rather than constructing a coherent autobiographical narrative, Matar presents memory as fractured, recursive, and emotionally unstable.

The memoir’s fragmented structure also formally embodies Sara Ahmed’s concept of estrangement. Ahmed argues that migration involves movement between “different registers of being” (343), a process that destabilises fixed notions of identity and belonging. Similarly, *The Return* continually shifts between past and present, childhood and adulthood, Libya and exile, refusing a stable narrative centre. These temporal and spatial transitions reinforce Ahmed’s argument that estrangement is not a static condition but “a process of transition” (343). Matar’s fractured narration therefore formalises the instability of exile: the text itself becomes structurally estranged.

Moreover, the memoir form itself contributes to this fragmentation. Unlike autobiography, which often seeks chronological continuity, memoir privileges emotional truth and subjective reconstruction. As Sigrid Kim argues, memoir concentrates on “significant moments” (2) rather than

attempting to narrate an entire life chronologically. Matar's selective reconstruction of memory therefore reflects both the conventions of memoir and the fractured consciousness produced by political exile. Through this fragmented narrative structure, *The Return* demonstrates how exile disrupts not only geography and belonging, but also memory, temporality, and the coherence of selfhood.

Absence, Silence, and the Search for the Father

The disappearance of Jaballa Matar serves as the central absence around which the memoir is structured. Although the father is physically absent for the majority of the story, his presence pervades the text through recollections, testimony, rumours, and imagined discussions. The memoir itself becomes an attempt to rebuild the incomplete narrative. In this way, the narrative's fragmented nature represents the impossibility of fully retrieving the father. Matar describes this unresolved absence in deeply haunting terms: "When a father is neither dead nor alive, when he is a ghost, the will is impotent" (32). The suspended situation that results from political disappearance is captured by the metaphor of the ghost. The narrator is psychologically caught between hope and loss because the father's fate is still unknown, making mourning itself insufficient.

Political disappearance also creates epistemological ambiguity. The narrator is continuously confronted with insufficient information, competing narratives, and silence about his father's situation. This uncertainty undermines both personal recollection and historical accuracy. The memoir therefore reveals how authoritarian violence goes beyond physical imprisonment, producing psychological fragmentation within families and across generations. This unresolved condition is explicitly expressed by the narrator when he confesses, "I envy the finality of funerals. I covet the certainty" (32). Unlike traditional mourning, which offers closure through rituals and burial, the father's disappearance leaves the family in a constant state of uncertainty. Without clear answers, their grief becomes a lasting psychological struggle instead of something they can move past.

As Ahmed suggests, migration and estrangement are "generational acts of storytelling" (342). In *The Return*, storytelling serves as a way to keep the father present, even when he is absent. Family stories become a means of resisting erasure and preserving continuity in response to political violence. Yet, these stories also reveal the deep emotional impact of remembering. The narrator's mother recognises how the search for the father has weighed on him, expressing hope that he might stop "carrying the ghost of [his] father" (36). In this way, the father appears as both a personal memory and a powerful political symbol, with his unresolved absence shaping the narrator's sense of self and belonging. The memoir thus shows how exile brings not only physical separation but also lasting emotional and psychological distance that can be felt across generations.

Home, Memory, and Estrangement

The novel explores themes of identity and exile through firsthand recollections structured as a memoir. To elucidate the significance of displacement and belonging, Matar reconstructs select aspects of the past rather than presenting a continuous life narrative. As Kim observes, memoirs are narratives centred on pivotal moments in a writer's life, emphasising significance over comprehensive chronology (Kim 2). By focusing on specific experiences, memoirists can “take an introspective and candid look at their inner world in conceptualising their identity and place in the world” (Kim 8). Accordingly, the memoir becomes a narrative space where identity, memory, and insight converge. The narrator reveals the past to understand how his sense of self has been altered by exile; his memories are interpretive rather than merely descriptive.

In the opening chapter, Matar underscores the disruption caused by migration, reflecting: “My family had left in 1979, thirty-three years earlier. This was the chasm that divided the man from the eight-year-old boy I was then” (2). The “chasm” metaphor suggests that exile entails not only physical displacement but also a profound temporal rupture in the narrator's identity. Ahmed argues that migration involves “a splitting of home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience” (341). Matar's separation from his childhood self reflects precisely this division. The adult narrator views himself as distinct from his young self, suggesting that movement disrupts the continuity of individual development. This experience aligns with Sara Ahmed's characterisation of estrangement as a condition arising from displacement, which compels individuals to reevaluate their connections to both former and current homes. The narrator engages in a wider narrative of displacement through recollection, connecting personal experience with historical mobility.

Furthermore, the memoir underscores the irreversible consequences of departing from one's homeland. Matar recalls the warning that “what you have left behind has dissolved. Return, and you will face the absence or the defacement of what you treasured. Never leave the homeland” (2). Here, the homeland is conceptualised as a foundational “source,” suggesting that identity is intimately rooted in both place and memory. Exile, by contrast, disrupts this foundational bond, rendering home a product of recollection rather than a material reality. This dynamic echoes Friedman's assertion that, within the diasporic condition, home becomes “a never land of dreams... a utopia”—a space irretrievably lost at the very moment of its idealisation (192). Viewed in this way, the elusiveness of home gives rise to an ontological dilemma: it ceases to be merely a physical place and instead becomes a mental or liminal state, shaping how diasporic individuals experience belonging and identity (Hanafy 186). Displacement, therefore, not only creates geographic separation but also transforms the individual's relationship to home. The narrator's apprehension about returning and facing the

“absence” (Ahmed 339) of his memories exemplifies the transformation of home into an ambiguous and unstable construct.

Similarly, Matar’s relationship to place is marked by profound ambivalence. He imagines introducing himself in New York and, when asked “Where are you from?” (4), responding simply: “New York” (4). He notes that such a reply would be “true and false, like a magic trick” (4). This hypothetical scenario illustrates the precariousness of identity within a diasporic context: although the narrator was born in Manhattan but raised elsewhere, he cannot fully ground his sense of belonging in a single geographic location. As Hanafy observes, this “magic trick” and the oscillation between being and not being from New York exemplify the ontological instability of Matar’s notion of home (Hanafy 188). Ahmed further argues that migration involves a “spatial reconfiguration of an embodied self” (341), a process that fragments identity by situating individuals between divergent histories and geographies. Matar’s desire to claim New York as home represents an effort to reconcile the tensions of exile by adopting an identity that is once authentic and performative.

Matar’s reflections on Manhattan further elucidate the emotional complexity inherent in the sense of belonging. He describes the city as simultaneously “meant nothing to me but also everything” (15), comparing his relationship to it with that of “an orphan” (4) contemplating “the mother who had laid him on the doorstep of a mosque” (15). This metaphor highlights the contradictory nature of diasporic attachment: although the narrator lacks personal memories of Manhattan, the city nonetheless symbolises the possibility of belonging and stability. Thus, home, in this context, emerges as an imagined rather than an experienced space. Ahmed’s scholarship underscores that home functions as an affective orientation shaped by memory, longing, and loss. This emotional dimension is most vividly expressed through the narrator’s connection to Manhattan, which serves as a symbolic anchor despite physical separation. Ahmed notes that the “lived experience of being-at-home hence involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other” (341). By internalising distant histories and geographies, the migratory individual maintains a sense of home characterized not by a fixed location, but by the ongoing emotional “leakage” of remembered places into present identity.

In the novel, memory is closely connected to sensory experience. Ahmed suggests that locality “defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers” (341), indicating that the idea of home is felt physically rather than only in the mind. Matar often focuses on sensory details in his recollections, which allows memory to serve as a way to temporarily rebuild a sense of home. For instance, while in exile, he recalls, “I remember the shape of his ear, how my eyes focused on it” (Matar 21), using one clear physical detail to bring the past back and recreate the domestic space he lost.

Yet, these sensory memories can also render feelings of estrangement stronger. When the narrator returns to Libya, he faces the gap between his memories and the reality in front of him. Places that once felt familiar now seem changed by time and political turmoil, creating tension between what is remembered and what is real. As a result, memory can be both comforting and unsettling: it links the narrator to his past, but also shows that the past cannot be fully regained

Exile exerts a significant influence on Matar, compelling him to adopt new identities to navigate unfamiliar environments. During his time at a boarding school in England, he is required to live under a pseudonym and pose as “the son of an Egyptian mother and an American father” (16). Initially, he finds it “surprisingly easy” (16) and even enjoyable to “pretend to be someone else” (16). This episode exemplifies the performative nature of identity in diasporic settings; displacement obliges individuals to modify or conceal aspects of their identities to adapt to new social contexts. Memoir writing often mirrors this dynamic, allowing authors to revisit and reinterpret formative experiences that have shaped their self-perception. As Kim contends, memoirs frequently “mine an individual experience to get at a universal truth, bringing the author’s world and identity into the open” (3). Thus, the narrator’s reflection on his shifting identity reveals not only a personal memory but also a broader insight into the fluidity of selfhood within the exilic condition.

The psychological ramifications of exile are most evident when the narrator articulates what he refers to as “distance-sickness,” ultimately concluding that he will “never truly belong anywhere” (118–119). This term encapsulates the emotional state of estrangement associated with migration, wherein displacement generates a pervasive sense of suspension between locations. The narrator’s habitual walks through unfamiliar environments signify a pursuit of orientation, implying that migration may ultimately facilitate a convergence between identity and place. However, this search remains unresolved, thereby reinforcing the notion that exile produces a persistent condition of liminality. The physical landscape of Libya further functions as a metaphor for this fragmented sense of self. The narrator contends that the prevalence of unfinished buildings across the country signifies a collective social condition: “Our unfinished homes are... a reflection of our present. Just as we have made them, they have come to define us” (148). The motif of incompleteness thus mirrors the narrator’s experience of exile, suggesting that the concept of belonging, much like these structures, is perpetually provisional and ambiguous. The memoir form enables the narrator to revisit and reinterpret fragments of the past through a contemporary lens.

Conclusion

Hisham Matar’s *The Return* illustrates that exile constitutes not merely a temporary disruption, but an enduring condition that fundamentally reshapes notions of identity, memory, and belonging. Through a

deliberately fragmented autobiographical structure, Matar articulates the fractured subjectivity that results from political violence, displacement, and prolonged uncertainty. The memoir's non-linear structure, repeated memories, and blend of personal and political events all reflect the instability that comes with exile. This shows how being uprooted can weaken both a person's sense of place and the continuity of their identity and memories. In the book, the idea of home is constantly reshaped by memory, sensory experience, and storytelling, not just by physically returning.

Drawing upon Sara Ahmed's theoretical framework, the concept of home emerges not as a fixed or stable endpoint, but as an unstable and continually negotiated space, shaped by the interplay of memory, loss, and affective attachment. Libya is portrayed both as a remembered homeland, a place of political suffering, and a deeply emotional but unreachable space. The memoir challenges the idea that returning home can restore what was lost, showing that exile permanently changes one's relationship to home. It also suggests that political exile is not just about leaving a place, but brings lasting psychological and generational effects. The disappearance of Jaballa Matar becomes the central loss of the story, turning personal grief into a broader reflection on political violence, erased histories, and unresolved pain. The narrator tries to recover both his father and his homeland through stories, memories, rumours, and fragments from others, but the memoir ultimately reveals that fully regaining either is impossible. *The Return* presents exile as a state of limbo, where certainty is out of reach, and a sense of belonging is always incomplete.

The memoir also questions simple oppositions like home and away, presence and absence, and belonging and alienation. Matar shows that returning is not a straightforward resolution, but instead a meeting with brokenness, changed places, and lost history. The narrator's shifting sense of self and uncertain feelings about returning show how difficult it is to fully recover a stable sense of belonging. Instead, belonging is something that is built through remembering, telling stories, and constantly moving between past and present. In this way, home becomes an ongoing process shaped by movement and memory, rather than a place that can simply be found again.

Consequently, *The Return* turns personal testimony into a thoughtful reflection on exile and the emotional impact of political violence. Matar explores the complex relationship between memory and identity in exile by blending memoir, historical reflection, and fragmented storytelling. The memoir suggests that alienation is more than just losing a home; it is about constantly dealing with incomplete histories, partial memories, and uncertain feelings of belonging. Matar shows that the search for home is never fully finished, remaining a continuous and unresolved part of the diasporic experience.

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